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Original Article

An International Comparison of Dietary Patterns in 9-11 year Old Children

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Running head: Dietary patterns in children

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1 **ABSTRACT**

2 **Background/Objective:** Dietary pattern is defined as a combination of foods and drinks and the
3 frequency of consumption within a population. Dietary patterns are changing on a global level,
4 which may be linked to an increased incidence of chronic diseases. The aim of this study was to
5 identify and compare dietary patterns among 9-11 year old children living in urban regions in
6 different parts of the world.

7 **Methods:** Participants were 7199 children (54% girls), aged 9-11 years, from 12 countries situated
8 in all major world regions. Food consumption was assessed using a 23-item Food Frequency
9 Questionnaire. To identify dietary patterns, principal components analyses (PCA) were carried out
10 using weekly portions as input variables.

11 **Results:** Both site-specific and pooled PCA resulted in two strong components. Component 1
12 ('unhealthy diet pattern' score) included fast foods, ice cream, fried food, French fries, potato chips,
13 cakes and sugar-sweetened sodas with >0.6 loadings. The loadings for component 2 ('healthy diet
14 pattern' score) were slightly weaker with only dark green vegetables, orange vegetables,
15 vegetables in general, and fruits and berries reaching a >0.6 loading. The site-specific diet pattern
16 scores had very strong correlations with the pattern scores from the pooled data: $r=0.82$ and 0.94
17 for components 1 and 2, respectively.

18 **Conclusions:** The results suggest that the same 'healthier' and 'unhealthier' foods tend to be
19 consumed in similar combinations among 9-11 year old children in different countries, despite
20 variation in food culture, geographical location, ethnic background and economic development.

21 **Key words:** food consumption, eating, obesity, global trends

22 **Trial Registration:** ClinicalTrials.gov: Identifier NCT01722500

23

24 INTRODUCTION

25 The global burden of non-communicable diseases (NCD) is continuously increasing,
26 particularly in low-to-middle income countries. ^{1,2} NCD risk factors can be encountered at all ages,
27 and risk-associated behaviours may be adopted already early in life. ³ It is particularly alarming that
28 childhood obesity is becoming more prevalent in low-to-middle income countries. ⁴ Interventions on
29 the prevention of obesity in children have been conducted, but they are mostly small-scale. ⁵ Little
30 is known about the costs and effectiveness in upscaling these studies to the population level. ⁴
31 Moreover, the translation of the findings across populations with different geographic and/or
32 sociocultural backgrounds is uncertain. ⁶

33 Diet is an important determinant of the NCD risk. ¹ Food consumption has been in rapid
34 transition during the recent decades, e.g., the consumption of meat and sugar has increased in
35 many low and middle income countries. ⁷ Modifying eating behaviour on a population level requires
36 both individual- and environment-based policies and actions. ⁸ There is a need to understand and
37 compare broader dietary patterns between countries representing different geographical regions
38 and developmental stages. Similarities offer possibilities for joint strategies and learning from other
39 populations, while dissimilar dietary determinants call for more population-specific strategies.

40 Dietary patterns can be identified by theory-driven and data-driven methods. In the former, the
41 participants are given a dietary index score based on theoretical assumptions, e.g., components of
42 a healthy diet. ^{9,10} Although this score can be adapted to different cultural settings, ¹¹ it is unlikely
43 that a single theory-driven score could be used for a global comparison of countries. Data-driven
44 methods are not *per se* based on assumptions of the relationships between diet and health and are
45 hence likely to be more suitable for international comparisons. In these methods, scores are
46 obtained by identifying underlying correlation matrices of dietary behaviours by principal
47 component analysis (PCA) or cluster analysis. ¹² The results show existing and common dietary
48 patterns which may or may not have an association with health.

49 The present study has taken a global view on food habits in children by comparing dietary
50 patterns in more than 7000 boys and girls in 12 research sites situated in all major world regions.
51 The data are from the International Study of Childhood Obesity, Lifestyle and the Environment

(ISCOLE) which is a unique multi-national study designed to determine the relationships between lifestyle behaviors and obesity in children.¹³ The main aim was to identify, evaluate and compare dietary patterns among 9-11 year old children living in urban regions in different parts of the world. Moreover, we show the reliability of this approach. Dietary pattern in this paper is defined as a combination of foods and drinks and the frequency of consumption within the study population.

METHODS

Setting

ISCOLE is a multi-national cross-sectional study. The rationale, design and methods have previously been published in detail.¹³ The participating 12 study sites come from low, middle and high income countries spanning a wide range of the Human Development Index. The site-specific samples were not intended to be nationally representative. Rather, the primary sampling frame was schools, typically stratified by an indicator of socio-economic status in order to maximize variability within sites. The sample consisted of schools from urban and semi-urban areas. A standard protocol was used to collect data across all sites, and all study personnel underwent rigorous training and certification before and during data collection.

The Institutional Review Board at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center (coordinating center) approved the overarching ISCOLE protocol, and the Institutional/Ethical Review Boards at each participating institution also approved the local protocol. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and child assent was also obtained as required by local Institutional/Ethical Review Boards before participation in the study. Data were collected from September 2011 through December 2013.

Participants

Out of 7806 consented ISCOLE participants, a total of 7372 participated in the data collection and were included in the overall study sample.¹⁴ We used data from those 7199 children (54% girls) who had an adequately completed diet questionnaire (Table 1). The age of participants was similar in all countries (9-11 years), whereas the prevalence of obesity (BMI z-score $>+2$ from the WHO reference¹⁵) varied by site from 5.8 (Colombia) to 23.7% (China).

Data for the reliability analysis were collected as part of a sub-study of ISCOLE in a sub-sample of 321 children from Colombia (N=112), Finland (N=98) and the United States (N=111). The main objective of the sub-study was to assess the reliability and validity of the food frequency questionnaire applied in ISCOLE.¹⁶

Measurements

Food consumption

Food consumption was assessed using a food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) adapted and modified from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey (HBSC).¹⁷ In the FFQ, the participants reported their 'usual' consumption frequency of 23 different food groups, with response categories from *never to more than once a day*. For this paper, the reported consumption frequencies were converted into weekly portions as follows: 'never' into 0, 'less than once a week' into 0.5, 'once a week' into 1, 'on 2-4 days a week' into 3, 'on 5-6 days a week' into 5.5, 'every day' into 7, and 'more than once a day' into 10 portions a week. The reliability and validity of the FFQ has been reported elsewhere in this supplement.¹⁶

Statistical analyses

To identify dietary patterns among the study population, principal components analyses (PCA) were carried out using the weekly portions as input variables. Fruit juices were excluded from these analyses due to low validity.¹⁶

The PCAs were performed first by using the total dataset, and then for each site separately. The scree plot curve showed a decline with a clear elbow between the second and third components, thus two components were eventually chosen for each analysis. The components were then rotated with an orthogonal varimax transformation to force non-correlation of the components ($r=0.000$) and to enhance their interpretation. The component scores were assessed by summing the products of a multiplication of optimal regression weights by the subject's food consumption variables ; this was done for each participant for both diet pattern scores, which were standardized to ensure normality. Version 9.3 of the SAS statistical package for Windows (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA, 2011) was used for the analyses.

106 Pearson correlations were determined to examine the associations between the two diet
 107 pattern scores, and also between the site-specific and overall diet pattern scores. A two-sample t-
 108 test was used to test the sex-differences in pattern scores.

109 For the reliability analysis, the FFQ was applied twice (FFQ1 and FFQ2). The time interval
 110 between the first and second administration was on average 4.9 (SD 1.6) weeks. We used the
 111 loadings of the two diet patterns resulting from the PCA performed for the total dataset (12 sites)
 112 and calculated the component scores for the FFQ1 and FFQ2 using the 3-site (Colombia, Finland,
 113 USA) validation data.¹⁶ The reliability was assessed by comparing component scores for FFQ1
 114 and FFQ2 using Spearman correlation coefficients and intra-class correlation coefficients. The
 115 reliability analysis was conducted for all three sub-study sites both together and separately.

116 **RESULTS**

117 The median of consumption of fruit and berries indicated daily frequency and the consumption
 118 frequency of vegetables was also close to daily (Table 2). Food groups consumed closer to once
 119 or a couple of times weekly were, e.g., ice cream, cakes, sodas, energy drinks and sports drinks.
 120 The between-site variation in some of the food groups was remarkable. For instance, skimmed and
 121 low-fat milk were used on average once a day in Finland and Portugal, but only around once a
 122 week in India and Colombia. In contrast, India had the most frequent mean consumption of whole
 123 milk (7.2 times weekly), and Canada, Finland, UK and Portugal the lowest (1.5 to 1.7 times a
 124 week). The consumption frequencies for each site are shown as Supplementary Table 1.

125 The component loadings indicating the two strongest dietary patterns across all sites are
 126 shown in Table 3. Pattern 1 was the stronger out of these two; this is indicated by the number of
 127 food groups with moderate or strong loading (>0.3) and the variance explained. Loadings for fast
 128 foods, ice cream, fried food, French fries, potato chips, cakes and sugar-sweetened sodas were
 129 >0.6. The component loadings for pattern 2 were slightly weaker with only dark green vegetables,
 130 orange vegetables, vegetables in general, and fruits and berries reaching a >0.6 loading. After
 131 considering the characteristics of the identified patterns, we named them 'unhealthy diet pattern'
 132 (pattern 1) and 'healthy diet pattern' (pattern 2) to reflect known associations between food
 133 consumption and health.^{18,19}

134 The site-specific analyses (PCA done for each site separately) yielded two strong patterns
 135 which were characterized almost identically with food groups already loaded in the pooled data
 136 (Supplementary Table 2). Indicating the global similarities in children's dietary patterns, the site-
 137 specific diet pattern scores had a very strong correlation with the pattern score from the pooled
 138 data: correlations for site-specific vs. pooled scores were $r=0.82$ and 0.94 for patterns 1 and 2,
 139 respectively.

140 We calculated the site-specific mean score values from the pooled analyses to compare sites
 141 and sexes. A negative score indicates that the dietary pattern is less predominant in that particular
 142 site, compared with the overall average across sites, while a positive score indicates stronger
 143 predominance.

144 The unhealthy diet pattern score was highest in South Africa and the USA, and lowest in
 145 Canada and Finland (Figure 1 and Supplementary Table 3). The between-site differences in the
 146 healthy diet pattern scores were smaller. This pattern was most predominant in Canada and least
 147 in Brazil and Colombia. The sex differences in the unhealthy diet pattern scores were significant
 148 ($p<0.05$) in eight sites; in all these, boys had higher scores. Fewer sex differences were found for
 149 the healthy diet pattern; the only significant difference (Portugal) showed higher healthy diet
 150 pattern scores in girls. However, the numerical difference was in the same direction in all sites,
 151 except for Brazil, namely a tendency for the healthy diet pattern to be more common among girls
 152 than among boys.

153 Results on the reliability of the scores for all three participating sites combined are presented in
 154 Table 4. Both Spearman correlation and the intra-class correlation coefficients indicated moderate
 155 to strong reliability for both scores; slightly stronger for the unhealthy diet score. The reliability
 156 scores for each of the three sites separately are presented as Supplementary Table 4.

157 **DISCUSSION**

158 The main and novel finding in the present report was that very similar dietary patterns were
 159 identified in children from 12 countries, representing a wide variation in terms of development,
 160 culture, geography, socioeconomic status and ethnic background. It is important to emphasize
 161 what the patterns are: dietary patterns are defined as existing combinations of foods and drinks

162 and the frequency of consumption that maximally explain the variation within the study population.
 163 However, the pattern scores are relative to other countries. Hence, it is not contradictory to
 164 identify scores indicating similar dietary patterns which yet have a different predominance in
 165 different sites.

166 We named the identified dietary patterns as 'unhealthy diet pattern' and 'healthy diet pattern' to
 167 illustrate them comprehensively. The naming was not based on any observed health-related
 168 associations among these participants, however, the foods most strongly characterizing the
 169 'unhealthy' or 'healthy' diet patterns can be found among the recommended foods for consumption
 170 or restriction, as in dietary guidelines set by authorities in many countries.^{20,21} Moreover, the
 171 classification of food items and groups as potentially healthy and unhealthy is also based on data
 172 from population-based cohort studies and systematic reviews.^{18,19}

173 PCA yields rotated patterns which are neither exclusive nor reverse to each other. In theory a
 174 child can simultaneously have high (or low) scores in both healthy and unhealthy diet patterns.
 175 Canada, for instance, scored high in healthy and low in unhealthy, while Finland had low mean
 176 scores in both. What the data indicate, however, is that the two most evident dietary patterns were
 177 characterized by very similar foods, despite the great variance in socio-demographic and cultural
 178 background in the ISCOLE sites. Foods often regarded as 'empty calories', that is, fast foods, ice
 179 cream, fried foods, French fries, potato chips, cakes and sugar-sweetened sodas, do certainly not
 180 represent culturally traditional foods in many of the ISCOLE countries. The strong correlation of
 181 these foods corroborate the globalization of eating trends, especially in low to middle income
 182 countries.⁷

183 While PCA is a purely data-driven approach and the identified dietary patterns therefore truly
 184 exist in the studied populations, it may still be that we have not been able to capture the most
 185 predominant patterns in all sites. This may be reflected in the reported food consumption
 186 frequencies; the sum of all frequencies showed differences between sites, indicating that the
 187 provided food groups in the questionnaire were more fitting for some food cultures than for others.
 188 Other subjective analytical decisions based on the researchers' discretion include conversion of
 189 the frequencies into portions, methodological details of the PCA, and the criteria with which the

190 number of principal components to be derived was decided. However, the two extracted and
191 identified components explained 22% and 14% of the total variation in the reported food
192 consumption. Given the general difficulty in identifying dietary patterns, the above numbers can
193 thus be considered as a satisfactory description of the underlying true diets among the studied
194 populations.

195 Identification of dietary patterns has proven to be a useful approach in nutritional epidemiology,
196 complementing the more reductionist single-nutrient or single-food approaches.²² However, there
197 are several methodological considerations when using data-driven methods, such as PCA. The
198 analysis and its results are strongly dependent on the selection of input variables, i.e., food groups.
199 An important question is whether the identified dietary patterns are real, or only artefacts created
200 by the food groups in the FFQ. In the subsequent validation study,¹⁶ we showed that most of the
201 eaten foods were correctly placed in their category. However and most importantly, the validation
202 study found only a few differences between three culturally different countries (Colombia, Finland
203 and USA) which gives confidence to assume that the identified dietary patterns are indeed
204 genuine.

205 The finding that girls had more frequent healthy patterns and less frequent unhealthy diet
206 patterns was expected from previous data from different countries.^{23,24} In fact, identifying the
207 anticipated sex-difference gives confidence for the validity of both the FFQ and in particular the
208 pattern analyses. We have also recently used these diet scores in models predicting obesity in
209 children in the ISCOLE sample.¹⁴ In these analyses, the diet pattern scores were not significantly
210 related to obesity. This slightly unexpected finding may be related to the statistical model used
211 (e.g. the other variables), to reverse causality (obesity may affect eating) and the fact that the
212 scores describe dietary quality, not energy intake.

213 In conclusion, our study shows clear evidence on the globalization of diets among children
214 around the world. The results suggest that the same 'healthier' and 'unhealthier' foods tend to be
215 consumed in similar combinations among 9-11 year old children in different countries despite the
216 huge variation in food culture, geographical location, ethnic background and economic

217 development. The findings give support to internationally mutual targets in improving dietary
218 patterns in children. ^{3,4,8}
219

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229

230 **Conflicts of Interest**

231 MF has received a research grant from Fazer Finland and has received an honorarium for
232 speaking for Merck. AK has been a member of the Advisory Boards of Dupont and McCain Foods.
233 RK has received a research grant from Abbott Nutrition Research and Development. VM is a
234 member of the Scientific Advisory Board of Actigraph and has received an honorarium for speaking
235 for The Coca-Cola Company. TO has received an honorarium for speaking for The Coca-Cola
236 Company. The authors reported no other potential conflicts of interest.

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- 307

308 **FIGURE LEGEND**

309 **Figure 1:** Site-specific mean scores for the unhealthy (a) and healthy (b) dietary patterns.

310 Significant ($P < 0.05$) site-specific difference between the sexes are shown.

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312

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Table 1. Description of the participants included in the analysis.

Site	Nr (% girls)	Age, years Mean (SD)	% obese ^a
Australia (Adelaide)	519 (54%)	10.7 (0.4)	10.8
Brazil (Sao Paulo)	567 (51%)	10.5 (0.5)	21.5
Canada (Ottawa)	560 (58%)	10.5 (0.4)	12.0
China (Tianjin)	546 (47%)	9.9 (0.5)	23.7
Colombia (Bogota)	918 (51%)	10.5 (0.6)	5.8
Finland (Helsinki, Espoo & Vantaa)	535 (53%)	10.5 (0.4)	6.0
India (Bangalore)	620 (53%)	10.4 (0.5)	10.5
Kenya (Nairobi)	555 (54%)	10.2 (0.7)	6.7
Portugal (Porto)	755 (54%)	10.4 (0.3)	17.9
South Africa (Cape Town)	509 (61%)	10.3 (0.7)	10.6
UK (Bath & NE Somerset)	518 (55%)	10.9 (0.5)	10.1
USA (Baton Rouge)	597 (57%)	10.0 (0.6)	18.0
Total	7 199 (54%)	10.4 (0.6)	12.6

^aObesity defined as BMI z-score >+2 from the WHO reference

Table 2. Description of food consumption weekly frequencies. The range of site-specific mean values illustrates the between-site variability.

Food item	Mean (SD) ¹	Median ¹	Range of site-specific mean values	
			lowest	highest
Vegetables	5.43 (3.48)	5.5	3.8	7.3
Dark green vegetables	3.55 (3.42)	3.0	1.8	5.6
Orange vegetables	4.07 (3.41)	3.0	2.6	5.4
Fruits and berries	5.84 (3.35)	7.0	4.5	7.3
Beans, lentils, bean curd, eggs	4.09 (3.34)	3.0	1.4	5.3
Whole grains	4.51 (3.69)	3.0	2.5	6.2
Fish	2.03 (2.60)	1.0	1.1	3.8
Skimmed milk, low-fat milk	3.85 (4.07)	1.0	0.6	7.0
Whole milk	3.54 (3.93)	1.0	1.5	7.2
Cheese	2.93 (3.19)	1.0	0.9	4.7
Other milk products	4.09 (3.39)	3.0	2.7	5.5
Fast foods	1.71 (2.51)	0.5	0.8	3.9
French fries	1.73 (2.39)	1.0	0.8	3.8
Fried food (nuggets, fish sticks)	2.45 (2.91)	1.0	1.2	5.3
Potato chips	2.28 (2.82)	1.0	0.9	4.6
Ice cream	2.09 (2.70)	1.0	1.1	4.4
Sweets (candy/chocolate)	2.99 (3.01)	1.0	1.7	4.5
Cakes, pastries, donuts	1.78 (2.46)	0.5	0.9	3.4
Sugar-sweetened sodas	2.29 (2.83)	1.0	1.0	4.2
Sports drinks	1.68 (2.88)	0.5	0.4	4.8
Energy drinks	0.81 (2.21)	0.0	0.1	2.8
Diet sodas	1.30 (2.41)	0.5	0.5	2.6

¹ Calculated from individual values

Table 3: Factor loadings per food group/item in the two strongest patterns (all sites combined)

	Pattern 1	Pattern 2
Fast foods	0.73	0.06
Ice cream	0.70	0.04
Fried food (nuggets, fish sticks)	0.69	0.08
French fries	0.68	0.05
Potato chips	0.66	0.01
Cakes, pastries, donuts	0.64	0.03
Sugar-sweetenedsodas	0.61	-0.13
Sports drinks	0.59	0.20
Energy drinks	0.56	0.17
Sweets (candy/chocolate)	0.53	-0.16
Dietsodas	0.44	0.18
Other milk products	0.40	0.33
Darkgreenvegetables	-0.01	0.73
Orangevegetables	0.06	0.73
Vegetables	-0.16	0.70
Fruits and berries	0.00	0.61
Wholegrains	0.17	0.51
Beans, lentils, bean curd, eggs	0.25	0.40
Fish	0.34	0.39
Skimmed milk, low-fat milk	-0.05	0.37
Cheese	0.24	0.35
Wholemilk	0.25	0.13
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	4.8	3.1
<i>% of variance explained</i>	22	14

Table 4. Test-retest reliability of the diet pattern scores developed for ISCOLE study (Median (25th, 75th percentile))

Category	Diet score median (25 th , 75 th percentile)		Test-retest results	
	FFQ1 ^a	FFQ2 ^b	ρ^c	ICC ^d
Unhealthy diet pattern	-0.23 (-0.61,0.47)	-0.33 (-0.68,0.07)	0.79	0.78
Healthy diet pattern	-0.48 (-0.95,0.21)	-0.63 (-1.07,-0.15)	0.58	0.56

^a Food Frequency Questionnaire administered in the period of time 1

^b Food Frequency Questionnaire administered 4 weeks after the first FFQ

^c Spearman correlation coefficient

^d Intra-class correlation coefficient

Figure 1: Site-specific mean scores for the unhealthy (a) and healthy (b) dietary patterns. Significant ($P < 0.05$) site-specific difference between the sexes are shown.

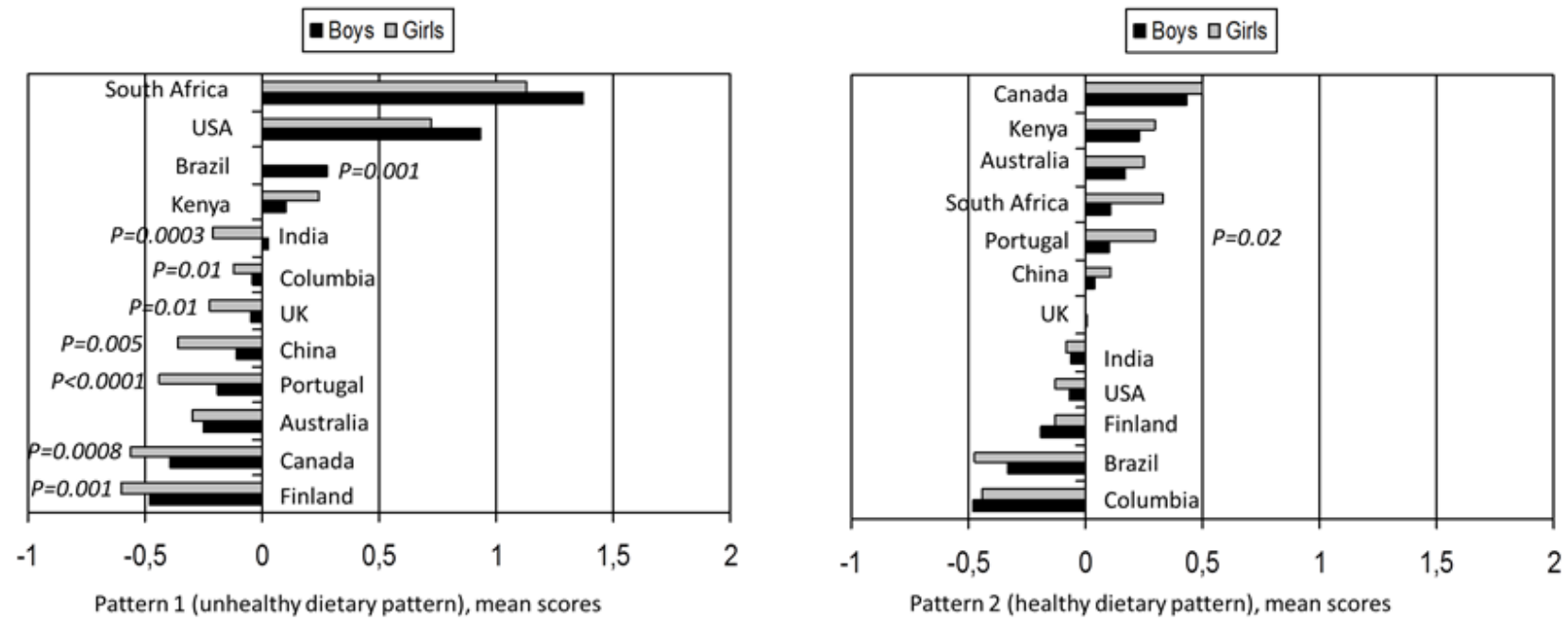


Fig. 1